

Tevet – Lesson 2

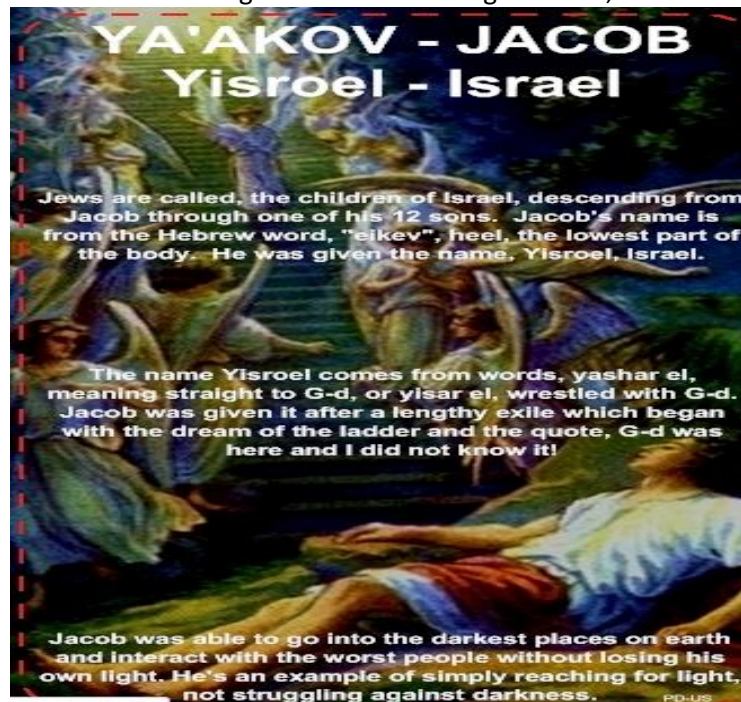
"Darkness, no matter how ominous and intimidating, is not a thing or force: it is merely the absence of light. So, light need not combat and overpower darkness in order to displace it - where light is, darkness is not. A thimbleful of light will therefore banish a roomful of darkness. The same is true of good and evil: evil is not a thing or force, but merely the absence or concealment of good. One need not 'defeat' the evil in the world; one need only bring to light its inherent goodness." Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Lubavitcher Rebbe)

Reaching for Light instead of Battling the Dark

Growing up, I was the only Jew in all of my classrooms. At 5 years old, my best friend was a little girl who lived on my block named, Candy. She was my first confrontation with the darkness known as anti-Semitism. She told me that the reason my mom used foul language was because she was Jewish. My mom DID use a whole lot of curse words. But she was also a lawyer and became one of the first female judges in California. She could be very judgmental, outspoken and direct – she didn't mince her words! I do have some scars from growing up with her. But Candy hurt me even worse by trying to undermine my connection to my Jewish ancestry.

Later as we got older, she of course wanted to convert me! At the time, I was a very lost Jew because the reform Temple I grew up in didn't satisfy my desire for deep spirituality. She told me my religion was a dead religion and told me I had the devil in me. Xtians wanting to convert us comes from their fear of what they call, "hell". Later, when I was in college, my first roommate grew up in Catholic schools and when I told her I was Jewish she said she thought Jews were mythical characters with horns and tails!

When I had my own little children in public school, they were also the only Jews in their classes. It really bothered me when there was such hullabaloo in December around xmas. One of the kindergarten teachers was even allowed to have an xmas tree in her classroom!!! That just seemed wrong to me. I learned that there was no way to fight against anti-Semitism or to try to change the displays all around us during this time of year. So, what I did do was go into their classrooms and make latkes and read from a children's storybook about Chanukah. I learned it did no good to try to battle darkness or eradicate something that I think is wrong. Instead, what works is to shine more light.



Enlighten

Reaching for the light rather than struggling against darkness is the only way to go. I want to enlighten because I know that most people in this country are xtian. I write it with an X because the religion has anti-Semitism embedded inside of its theology and holy book. See this [YouTube](#) for more info on what's actually said about Jews in the "new testament". I am unwilling to battle with it or with anyone but I will enlighten people. Some may read what I wrote above about xmas and say it's not really a religious holiday. Secular people these days don't even see the tree as religious - just a fun time that means nothing. Still, that isn't how the tree appears to me and I don't think I'm alone. Instead, when I see it, it is a symbol that represents the destruction of my people.

The Holocaust

I do believe that the holocaust wouldn't have happened in Europe without xtianity. Over the millennia, way before the holocaust, so many Jewish people were massacred, were forced to convert or burn to death, were forced out of their countries, and their books, synagogues and cemeteries were destroyed. It was illegal to be a Jew in Europe for hundreds of years. It was also illegal to practice Judaism and so "Crypto Jews" developed – "converted" Jews who hid their Jewish practices and pretended to be converted.

The Reasons for Suffering

We may all be able to say that it was wrong of Candy to say what she said and even more wrong of her mother and father for teaching her something so hateful. My personal anger and victimization should be validated. Still, all of the victim feelings get us nowhere! It helps to believe that Hashem is in control of everything. We may not know why the Holocaust happened. My [Rabbi Yochanon Friedman](#) told me, it would be evil to believe that there is a good reason for the Holocaust or for any suffering. Right? All we can do is say, there's a Higher Power with more information than my puny brain could possibly understand.

I like to believe that the things happen in my life, the way they do, for my own benefit. I can see now that I may not be so interested in making Kabbalah and Judaism available in this world if not for Candy. So, I can thank her for these classes! This is the only way I know to make any sense of what happens to me: to see it as propelling me to greater things. This world and our lives are not easy. The challenges sometimes are seemingly insurmountable. What we can do with them though, is to find the Light within them. We can hold to the hope that we will find that light.

On the Surface

One thing that has always been important to me is to look below the surface of things. Reform Judaism never touched me on a deep level and so, I believe it left me vulnerable to Candy. It seems to me that when we stay on the surface, the truth can be distorted. In fact, the ancient sages of the Talmud wrote that the reason for the destruction of the 2nd Temple was all of the "baseless hatred" between Jews – not because of the Romans! It is "sinas chinam" in Hebrew.

Baseless Hatred

What is baseless hatred? It's usually taught that it is hatred for no reason. In my thinking, it is hatred for many surface reasons and the inability to look deeper. When you stay on the surface, you don't even know what the Torah is really saying. For example, take the quote from Torah, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". If you don't learn from the people who brought this book to the world, you wouldn't know that it is talking about monetary compensation that is equal to the crime. You also wouldn't know that it was very rare that the death penalty was ever carried out.

There is hatred for no reason coming from staying on the surface of things. We really need to look deeper at each other and at what happens to us in order to banish this kind of hatred. Finding a Judaism that went much deeper touched my soul and so I became stronger inside of myself when confronted by people who wanted to convert me. I found a Judaism that is so gorgeous and a legacy of holy people and books so massive that it answered more of my questions than any other religion I had ever studied. I had found Hasidic Kabbalah.

What is Kabbalah?

I'd like to start explaining Kabbalah by teaching you about the 4 primary ways to understand the Torah or 5 Books of Moses, called "The Old Testament". There is an acronym for remembering these 4 levels of interpretation: PaRDeS which is actually a Hebrew word meaning Paradise and refers to Heaven or the Garden of Eden.

- **Pshat/Literal** – The simple, surface understanding of the text. For example, "In the beginning G-d created Heaven and Earth." There's no deeper meaning, this line just means what it says. Wrong use of Torah can come from this level of interpretation.
- **Remez/Hint** – This is a hint that we find from the literal text. For example, when a particular word's gematria/numerology adds up to another word and we make a connection between them. Example, "In the beginning, He created" adds up to the same as "on Rosh Hashana the world was created", so R.H. is the b-day of creation.
- **Drash/Homily** – A "midrash" is a deeper understanding of the text usually told in a story or analogy. For example, the word B'Reishit (in the beginning) can be seen as B'=2 (second letter of the Hebrew alphabet). And Reishit=Beginning So the word "B'reishit, translated, "in the beginning" can be translated, "2 beginnings", because B (the letter bet) = 2. And so we can extrapolate on that and say those 2 beginnings were darkness & then light – we have to go through darkness to access more light.
- **Sod/Secret** – This level is synonymous with Kabbalah. It's the esoteric and mystical way of interpreting Torah – the deepest interpretation. Example:
"The Tikkunei Zohar (a book which gives seventy (!) different esoteric explanations for the word bereshit) explains that the word bereshit can also be split into "bara shis" (created [with] six). This is because the world was created through G-d's six emotional powers: kindness, severity, beauty, victory, splendor and foundation."
http://www.chabadbythesea.com/library/article_cdo/aid/819698/jewish/How-Is-the-Torah-Interpreted.htm

History of Kabbalah

Kabbalah = L'Hakbil, to receive

The word, Kabbalah, means "receive".

Moses – Ezekiel 400 BCE

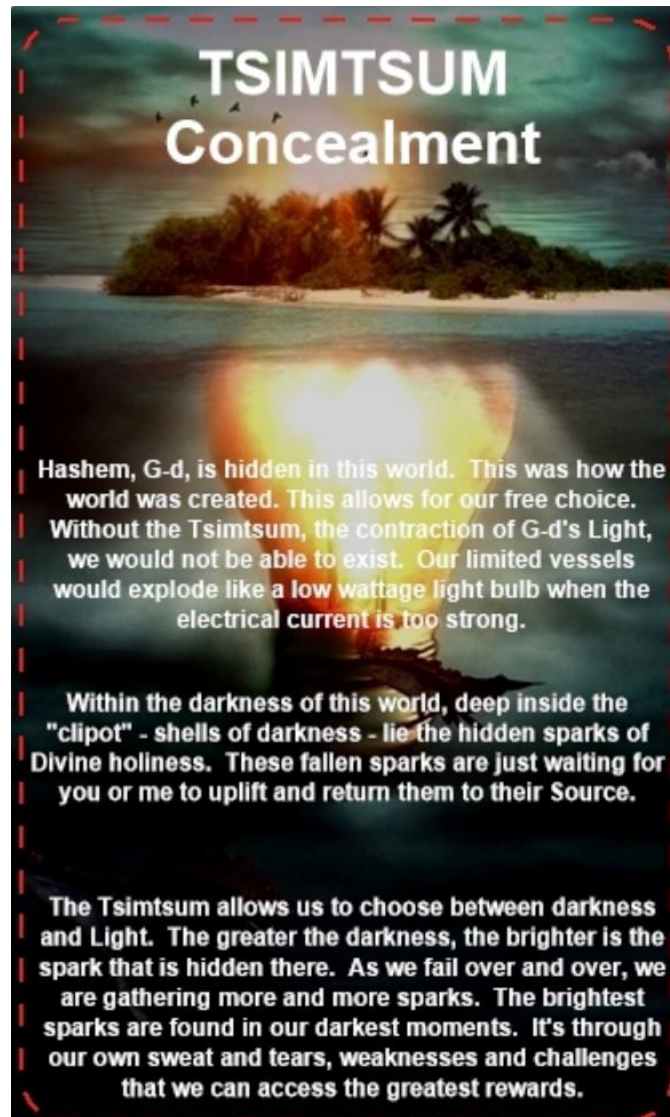
Kabbalah is a body of knowledge that was received by Moses on Mt Sinai and passed down through Joshua (who was leader after Moses and who conquered the land. It was known and practiced by the prophets during the First Temple period (5th century BCE). The prophet Ezekiel spoke about the Chariot and that was considered Kabbalah.

Men of the Great Assembly – 2nd Temple 70CE

By the 2nd Temple period, 400 years later, the Men of the Great Assembly (120 men) decided and wrote down in the Talmud that the mysteries of Ezekiel were to be kept secret and only passed down to a small group of people. It wasn't until after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE that the teachings were written down so that they weren't forgotten after the Romans murdered our 10 Holy Martyrs. Yes, there were many more martyrs during that time than only one Jewish man hung on a cross! In fact, the 10 were the small group who taught the secrets of Kabbalah.

Sefad – 1500 CE & Baal Shem Tov 1700CE

The Kabbalah came to life again in the 1500's in Safed, Israel among a group of rabbis who taught it and wrote it down. Yes, Jews have been living in Israel at all times. The primary rabbi in that time was named, Isaac Luria. Much of the Kabbalah taught today is from Luria. He developed the idea of Tsimtsum.



Chabad

In the 1700's Kabbalah came to life again with the Baal Shem Tov in Eastern Europe. It was at a time when most Jews were poor and uneducated and also at their lowest emotionally after the massacres by the Cossacks. The rich elite were the only ones educated Jewishly and so, the Baal Shem Tov taught that even the "potato farmers" could connect to Hashem with through hearts. The Kabbalah that I am teaching I learned from the people who are among the spiritual descendants of the Baal Shem Tov, the Hasidim. There are many different strains of Hasidim who all descend from the Baal Shem Tov. "Hasid" means pious.

The main books of Kabbalah are:

- **Sefer Yitzirah** (Book of Formation) is the oldest. Traditions link it to **Abraham** who lived BCE and Rabbi Akiva who lived during the destruction of the 2nd Temple in Roman Times 50-135 C.E
- **The book of Ezekiel**, especially his vision of the Chariot. This vision is known as *Maaseh Merkava*, the Discipline (or Workings) of the Chariot. Ezekiel was a 1st Temple prophet. Kabbalah is still called, *Maaseh Merkava*.
- **Sefer Bahir** (Book of Illumination) and the *Pirkey Hekhalot Rabatai* (The Greater Book of the Divine Chambers) were written by Rabbi Nehunia ben Hakanah and his disciple, the High Priest Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha during the violent times of the Roman exile after destruction of 2nd Temple.

- **The Zohar** (Book of Splendor), one of the main pillars of Kabbala, was taught by **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** around 135 C.E. Rabbi Shimon also lived during these tumultuous times when the Romans were killing all the great teachers. He hid in a cave with his disciples for 13 years.
- **Etz Chaim** ("Tree of Life") and **Pri Etz Chaim** (Fruit of the Tree of Life) were written by **Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572)**, universally referred to as the **Ari**, an acronym for "*Elo-hi Rabbi Yitzchak*", "The G-dly Rabbi Isaac". He and **Rabbi Moses Cordovero (d. 1570), known as the Ramak** are considered the greatest Kabbalists of modern times. They were among the rabbi's living in Safed. Rabbi Chaim Vital born c. 5303 (1543 CE) is renowned primarily as the recorder and editor of the teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria.
- Many books have been written on the teachings of Rabbi Yisrael **Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) (1698 – 1760)** founder of the Chassidic movement. His disciple, The Maggid (**Rabbi Dov Ber**) passed down his teachings and one of his disciples is the founder of Chabad, **Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi**, who wrote the book of **Tanya**, premier text of Chabad. The Chabad strain of Chassidism is an intellectual one, compared to other strains that focus on devotion and inspirational feelings rather than Chabad's focus on comprehending/knowing G-d and our place in existence/this world.

Chabad.org, Shimona, Shifra, Yochanon, UofJ & GTU

It is overwhelming how much information on Kabbalah there is through all of the books listed above and I have only glimpsed at a few of them! It's also just recently, in the last 10-20 years, that many of these books were translated into English. They are so dense that you really need a teacher to help you understand them. I did take a year of a rabbinic program at the U of J & a year at GTU with Daniel Matt who translated the Zohar. But this only makes me able to understand a bit of Hebrew & Aramaic. What I teach is the tiniest bit that I have been able to absorb from the articles, classes & videos on Chabad.org, as well as the classes I have taken from Shimona Tzukernik, Shifra Hendrie, Rav Doniel Katz, and my own rabbi, Yochanon Friedman.

Assignment: Write about your own confrontation with anti-Semitism and how that affected you. Can you see now the deeper reasons for that experience? What did it strengthen in you?

